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Stephen D. Sugarman

Education Reform at the Margin: Two Ideas

Parents and teachers seem increasingly alienated from their own schools. Here are two proposals for giving *individual* parents and teachers power to determine how small but significant portions of the school budget will be spent.

I am convinced that we need much more experimentation with true decentralized control over the spending of educational funds; not the creation of minidistricts or the adoption of school-site budgeting, but rather decision making at the individual teacher and individual family levels. I recognize the power of the entrenched bureaucracies: school boards and administrators on the one hand, teacher organizations on the other. For some time to come they will exercise hegemony over most public education dollars. But perhaps there is an opportunity for innovation at the margin. This opportunity is limited because there are few new public dollars available for education beyond those inevitably committed to cost-of-living increases in employee salaries. Yet this makes all the more important the desirability of trying out bold alternatives with those funds.

The past few years of experience with more centralized decision making with respect to new (or "extra") money — federal Title I funds and similar pots or large increases in general state aid brought about through school finance reform — have shown us that this route typically results in either 1) increases in employee salaries or 2) the hiring of more personnel — either aides or specialists (usually reading specialists), plus bureaucrats. In a few places these expenditures are thought to be educationally quite successful. If nothing else, they may be viewed as medium-scale public employment and guaranteed-wage programs or, to the extent that school volunteers are being converted into paid workers, an inventive income transfer scheme. Yet it is not clear that this spending pattern reflects the preferences of *individual* classroom teachers or of *individual* families — regardless of the role played by *representative* teachers and parents on planning bodies. The very requirement of an advance plan in many of the schemes shapes their spending in ways different from what could occur under a looser regime in which ad hoc decisions would be possible.

With this experience in mind, I propose two ideas for change that put into the hands of teachers and families, respectively, the discretion to spend as they wish a modest share of the public education budget.

I do not claim that decision makers not a part of a central bureaucracy will necessarily produce big changes in achievement scores, although this is plausible. My hope is more modest: Giving families and teachers actual power over a portion of the purse might change the way they feel about and relate to the system. It is frightening that teachers and families seem increasingly alienated from the educational institutions with which they are involved. Perhaps with a new role they will have the will to be more assertive about how the children who are their responsibility should be treated and more energetic in pursuit of that treatment. Lasting changes could follow from this commitment.

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To be sure, teachers and families might choose to spend the money on things that administrators and organized education groups find trivial or wasteful or even counterproductive. Alternatively, the expenditure pattern might mirror the existing decisional process. Yet, given the outcomes of our current arrangements, it is reasonably clear that, on the whole, whatever is done by families and teachers could not bring about results that were terribly worse than the entrenched interests would achieve.

Let me turn, then, to the two specific proposals. After outlining them I will consider with which children they should be implemented.

Teacher-Trustee Plan

Under the teacher-trustee plan each participating classroom teacher has an account upon which he may draw as trustee on behalf of his student beneficiaries. Suppose, for example, that the trust account of an elementary school teacher with a classroom of 30 beneficiaries is credited in the amount of \$200 per child. The teacher would then have \$6,000 to work with for the year. This may seem like a lot of money, but often today far more than that is spent in each classroom through compensatory education programs, for teacher aides and specialists.

The trust arrangement I propose would impose upon the teacher the general duty to use the funds for the children's benefit.

The only actual limitation on the use of the funds, however, would be that they be spent in a way that is lawful for the district. To that would be added but one further requirement: The teacher would be required to report to families of the student beneficiaries on his use of the funds. Probably there should be reports three times during the year: In the fall the teacher indicates how he contemplates spending the money; at mid-year he tells what has been done so far; and at the end of the year he tells the families where the money has gone and how he has made use of the goods and services it bought.

In suggesting some of the ways in which the trust account might be used, I wish to emphasize first that one lawful expenditure would be an increase in the teacher's own salary. In return for working harder on the students' behalf, he could pay himself from the fund. This is, I think, an important option for the teacher-trustee to be given, even though it is somewhat at odds with the powers of a traditional trustee. I include this option because of our experience in negotiations with teachers' organizations over the school budget; teachers as a group often assert that wage increases have a just claim on a big slice of any new but limited pie that is made available, and they often get a large piece. Under my proposal the teacher-trustee will now be put in a position to make that choice personally; he can draw a higher salary, if he believes he is the most deserving object of the funds under his control — so long as he is willing to report that to his students' families. Some will find this feature of the proposal

peculiar; either they do not trust teachers or else they view it as union busting. Neither reflects my view, for I see it as helping teachers to be more professional. However, I would not insist on including the "pay yourself" option.

The trust account could, in any event, be used for classroom materials, for field trips, for individual or group tutors, for special diagnostic counseling, etc. Teachers could also pool their funds for things that would benefit more than one classroom. Since the trust would exist for the benefit of the class as a whole, the teacher would not have to account for the money by individual student. He could indeed concentrate the funds on those who were needier, so long as he was willing to report his actions. His conduct would be guided by his moral responsibility as a fiduciary and the rules of disclosure. Other innovative spending possibilities would also be open to the teacher. He could provide books for home reading or finance after-school craft or skills lessons; he might use the funds to provide educational playthings as rewards for classroom performance of the type he favored. The teacher would be able to spend in a way that reflects his own educational philosophy, thereby opening up that philosophy for others to see, emulate, and evaluate. So as to maximize his freedom, many of the bureaucratic features of school hiring and purchasing would, I suspect, have to be relaxed.

If he wished, the teacher could seek the advice of others as to how the fund should be used by setting up an advisory body. His students as a group might be asked what they want. Whether or not the teacher solicits opinions, I foresee that he will be approached by interested families and others. The teacher-trustee plan provides an opportunity for a revitalization of parent/teacher groups or the growth of classroom-based parent groups who would have spending views and would hope to catch the attention of the individual teacher.

School Stamps Plan

Although students and their parents are likely to have some impact on the way the trust account is used in the teacher-trustee plan, it is also important for school policy makers to experiment with programs that put decision making in the hands of the family itself. This can be accomplished through school stamps, an idea modeled broadly after the federal food stamps plan.

Participating families would be provided with coupons — school stamps — that would enable them to acquire the educational services and goods they want most. These educational experiences would be obtained apart from the normal school program. Coupons might be worth \$8 per week, or maybe \$120 per term. The experiences selected could include reading tutoring, intensive study of one thing (such as bicycle repair or another language), fine arts lessons, or even the acquisition of educational items like books or science equipment (perhaps on a rental basis).

Many persons and groups could qualify as pro-

Under the teacher-trustee plan, a teacher would be allowed to spend perhaps \$6,000 annually in any way he considered beneficial to his students.

A school stamps system would permit parents to obtain important things they think the school program now lacks. They will thus extend their control over public education.

viders of goods and services for which the coupons could be used. The public schools themselves could offer after-school, evening, and weekend programs; but a pupil would not be restricted to the offerings of his own regular school. Other public institutions such as libraries and parks and recreation departments could also become providers. The state or district might even set up warehouses for the purpose of renting educational materials — telescopes, pocket calculators, and the like. Finally, private parties could offer programs in return for the coupons: dancing schools, photographic studios, financial institutions that could train in money management, reading clubs, and so on, as well as individual or small-group tutors of nearly every imaginable subject. Public schools have another role here: to lease space in their facilities for other offerers to use. The school stamps plan could operate in the summer as well as during the school year; either additional coupons could then be provided, or families could be asked to save up.

Through the school stamps system families will be able to obtain the important things they think are lacking in the regular school program. They will begin to find that they have more voice in the education of their children. The public system can also learn from the choices that are made. As administrators see which educational experiences families are selecting, they can consider including similar things in the regular program. Some would prefer that the students themselves, at least older ones, be given the power to select how the school stamps would be used; I certainly would favor experimenting with awarding the stamps to some junior and senior school students directly.

Some will be quick to point out the possibility of abuse in the scheme: Parents will try to convert the coupons to their own benefit; charlatans will defraud consumers. To some extent these abuses will be inevitable. There is a small black market in food stamps, for example, and there are, no doubt, some places where food stamps buy liquor despite the rules against it. It is also possible to buy “empty calorie” foods with the food coupons. But on the whole the food stamps program has not been abused.

I would require those seeking to be providers in the school stamps program to post a modest bond and to file an affidavit describing what they plan to offer. They would then become registered and eligible to exchange programs for coupons. These safeguards would go a long way to rid the system of outright fraud. In addition, the state would then publicize the registered offerings in each area so that families would get needed information about available programs. As an additional protection, the coupons could be made valid for only fairly short periods of time, and advance assignment of coupons would be invalid. In this way families would be helped, if they so wished, to shift from one provider to another without much difficulty.

So as to accommodate as broad a range of family views as possible, the definition of what type of program should qualify for the use of the coupons

would have to be very liberal. In this regard, it is not clear what constitutes an abuse. For example, if some families, by buying supervised recreation, should succeed in converting the program into what is effectively after-school day care, I would not find that objectionable, although others might. It seems to me that to keep some children away from street corners or unsupervised gangs might be a valuable investment in their long-run commitment to education.

Some “child savers” will reject the school stamps idea because they simply do not trust parents. But how can we know what kind of educational trustees parents will be for their children unless we give them the opportunity to try? The parents who today choose private education for their children can hardly be accused of neglect. To respond that these are rich parents is an elitist, distrusting-of-the-poor attitude that I find very troubling.

There are important roles for classroom teachers to play in the school stamps plan. Some might simply become service providers outside school hours; ironically, this route may more readily provide them with extra salary than would the teacher-trustee plan. Other teachers may elect to perform a broker function. I can easily imagine a trusted teacher’s joining up with a team of providers to whom he would refer those of his students whose families were willing. In this mode the school stamps and teacher-trustee plans are very much alike.

Which Children Should Benefit?

The teacher-trustee and school stamps plans could be made available in all classrooms and to all families. There is much to be said for the universal approach; but to concentrate the plans on targeted students could provide larger funds and coupons for those benefited. (Alternatively, it could lower the overall cost.) In my view, the choice should be approached by asking whether certain children are especially deserving. I will offer here three reasons why some children — in most cases poor children — may be seen to be more entitled than others to these new programs.

In recent years school finance reform has become a top legislative priority in most states; in many places, with or without judicial pressure, the legislature has moved toward substantial compliance with what I will call the “*Serrano* principle” (after the California Supreme Court case that adopted it): A child’s access to publicly provided educational resources must be free from the direct influence of wealth. In practice, the legislative objective has been to break the tie between school spending and school district property wealth that naturally developed under the typical finance scheme that states had employed since the 1920s.

But in this restricted form the *Serrano* principle leaves in place at least three kinds of inequalities that may offend one’s sense of equity. First, the *Serrano* principle does not preclude the influence of wealth on *private* (especially out-of-school) spending on the education of children; it is restricted to

public provision. Second, the *Serrano* principle does not reach the resource that the child's classroom peers represent; many believe that the higher the social class of one's classmates, the better off one is. Third, *Serrano's* concern about dollars does not include a commitment with respect to the actual goods and services delivered for those dollars. In the transition, disparities occur; owing to conditions largely beyond the district's control, teachers and other goods and services do not "cost" the same amount in all places.

As these inequalities are recognized, the temptation is to try to compensate for them by providing categorical grants to *districts* 1) with large numbers of poor children, 2) with high proportions of lower-class families, and 3) with high costs of education. Urban districts typically qualify on all accounts. The idea behind such grants is to give the deserving districts enough extra money to enable them generally to provide offerings equal to those of other districts. But this is not the only role for extra funds. They may also be used to provide education outside the normal program, which when combined with the regular program constitutes something generally equal to what children elsewhere have. This idea leads naturally to particular forms of the two plans here proposed.

Instead of providing categorical grants to districts, the funding of the teacher-trustee and school stamps plans may be undertaken in the following way: The former could be directed toward classrooms in schools with concentrations of lower-class children, while individual poor children, wherever found, could be enrolled in the latter. As for children in high-cost districts, some might be put in one program, some in the other. This suggests that children with compound disadvantages would be involved in both plans.

Apart from the above considerations, the source of the funds might also suggest the beneficiaries: If the money would otherwise go for compensatory

education to the poor, then it would seem essential to target the two plans I propose here, whereas if the funds come out of general school aid, the implication is less clear.

It would be important to carry out research in connection with the plans; of particular interest would be a comparison and evaluation of the spending patterns of teachers on the one hand and families on the other.

A Look to the Future

If the school stamps and teacher-trustee plans should succeed, there is reason to favor supporting them rather than the regular program when additional funds become available. Over time this would mean that these two decentralized spending programs would account for an increasingly large share of public spending on education. Public schools would generally retreat, I believe, to what they perceive to be their core functions. If more funds were put into the school stamps and teacher-trustee plans, state legislatures would have to decide whether to continue to concentrate funds on the poor or to spread them out among all children. This decision might depend upon the extent to which families generally reacted to the program with out-of-school educational programs for their children.

But these considerations are for the future. For now the important thing is to convince education authorities of the feasibility of the two ideas proposed here and to persuade certain districts to try them. The states or the federal government, of course, might provide funding earmarked for the school stamps and teacher-trustee plans. Yet their participation is not essential. School districts can experiment with the programs on their own. Whether they will or not may depend upon how aggressively parents and teachers press their claim to a share of the decision making. □

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Carrot Principle Accelerates Desegregation in Wisconsin

» Arthur Fleming, chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, urges metropolitan school officials not to wait for a court order to desegregate their schools. One Midwestern state has found a way to persuade policy makers to take Fleming's advice.

Wisconsin's legislature passed a bill signed into law in April, 1976, by then Governor Patrick Lucey as Chapter 220 of the state statutes. It provides for transfer of minority-group students, with state financial help, from districts or schools where minorities constitute 30% or more of total enrollment to districts or schools where minority enrollment is less than 30%. The law similarly provides for the transfer of non-minority-group students to districts or schools where the minority enrollment is 30% or more of the total enrollment. Financial incentives for voluntary integration are substantial.

In Milwaukee, which is desegregating under court order, the law's intradistrict transfer provision allows the district to count most students transferred under its court-ordered plan as 1.2 pupils for state

aid purposes. The interdistrict transfer provision allows the sending district to continue to count the transferee as one pupil enrolled for state aid purposes. And the receiving district is entitled to reimbursement of the *full cost* of the transfer students' education from the state.

The Milwaukee area experience is enlightening. Because of the equalization features of the general state aid formula, eight suburban receiving districts surrounding Milwaukee that participated in the program last year received an average of only \$286 per *resident* pupil in state aid; but during the same year they got an average of \$1,880 from the state for each of 321 *minority transfer* students from Milwaukee. Moreover, the law pays the full cost of student transportation.

According to the Center for National Policy Review, the percentage of black children attending highly segregated schools in the Midwest rose from 62% to 64% between 1970 and 1975. If more states were to pass Chapter 220 statutes, that trend could be reversed.

— Condensed from a contribution by William J. Kritek